# Richard Aedy on progress

*Posted on 29 August 2011*

Richard Aedy, host of Life Matters on ABC Radio National shares what's important to him for Australia's progress.

**To listen to Richard Aedy click on the link** here.

---

**The transcript**

I love the idea of progress. I always have.

I was five when we first landed on the moon, nine when the Queen opened the Opera House and 10 when Ian Chappell's side routed the English cricketers, sending them home defeated and very twitchy indeed about quick bowling.

It was all progress...it was all good.

Back then, people talked confidently of the future...there would be cars that would be able to fly, personal jetpacks, airlines so swift and technologically able you'd be able to go from London to Melbourne non-stop in just a few hours, having literally taken a short cut through space.

It was dazzling, I looked forward to it all and absolutely none of it has happened.

Indeed, if you confine your assessment to transport – and transport was very much a leading concern of my younger self, the first job I can remember wanting to do when I grew up was drive a hovercraft – then in some ways we have gone backwards.

A train journey from NSW's second city, Newcastle, to its capital, Sydney, takes longer now than it did in the early 1960s. In any of our big cities, many car trips take longer than they used to, even five years ago. And I believe, though I can't prove it, that the airlines treat us with more contempt than they used to.

So one area where I want to see a lot more progress is public transport. In particular, we need more and better rail services and more trams. It staggers me that Sydney, where I live, used to have one of the largest tram networks in the world and now has a rather short light rail line. It's a lovely way to get from Lilyfield or Glebe in the city's inner west, to Central railway station, if you're not in too much of a hurry...and don't mind going via the seafood market and the casino. We need a lot more than that. That would be progress.

I also think we've got a way to go on education. Don't get me wrong, we have one of the best education systems there is. But we really ought to – Australia's a rich country and for most of the time since World War II, we've been one of the most prosperous in the world. But despite this, we're slipping back.

There are several areas we can make real progress on. One is lift our retention rates. Nobody should leave before Year 12, including kids who are planning to go into trades, or a form of vocational education and training, because all of them are growing up into a world that requires more understanding of complexity.

But the biggest difference would come from improving our teachers.

Teacher quality is by far the most important determinant of outcomes in schools. American research has shown that the difference between a good teacher and a poor one is a year.

## Search

Search this Blog

## Recent Entries

The consultation continues...

Our last regular blog post

Blog contributions

## Recent Comments

Towards Q2: Tomorrow&

'Things that matter

'Things that matter

## Archive

November 2011 (4)

October 2011 (13)

September 2011 (91)

August 2011 (6)

July 2011 (1)

April 2011 (3)

That's how much further a class with a good teacher will get – they'll do 18 months worth of curriculum in a school year. A class with a poor teacher might only get through half what they should achieve in that time…so 6 months of the curriculum. We need to lift our teacher quality, it would be the most effective way of improving educational outcomes. As part of this we need to improve teacher training and professional development. We need to raise the status of this most vital of professions. And we need to pay them more too…it's all connected.

While we're still in the school system – languages. Australian kids spend less time learning another language than just about any other OECD country. The Americans may be worse, but still. The Finns, the Germans, and the Dutch all put us to shame – their schoolchildren routinely learn two additional languages. The Chinese are teaching their kids English in a big way.

Australia is fundamentally a small country. A small country with a very large landmass and significant mineral and energy resources. This century will be the Asian one – Asian countries are already our most important export markets. If we are to succeed, if we're really going to prosper over the next hundred years, we need to do more than take advantage of the resources boom – we need to build the industries and services that can take over when it's finished. To do this, and actually to take full advantage of the resources boom, we need many more Australians with language skills…and although French is beautiful and Italian is sexy, it would be a good idea if we focussed on Asian languages. It begins at school, let's make some progress on it.

I could spend the rest of my time talking about schools – easily – but I want to mention another level of education before I move on. Universities. We have some good ones and a few that are very good. But we don't have a truly great university: a Yale, or Cambridge, or Stanford or MIT. It probably isn't realistic to think we can ever get there – the costs of doing so would run into many billion dollars. But I think we should have a crack at it. Institutions like these produce enormous benefits, tangible and intangible. Not only in the intellectual property they create, or the serendipitous discoveries that change the world, but in the people they pull together.

I'm no economist and I'm not comfortable thinking of people as human capital. But it's clear that people are the greatest of all resources. A great university is a magnet for people and it says something about a place's values and ambition. If we could make progress on building a great university, from one of the very good ones we already have, it would repay us in spades. To have a truly clever country, that would be progress indeed.

Something else we to make progress on is our relationship with land and water. In the last 20 years, the meaning of the word progress has changed. It's moved from being a euphemism for development, for literally building something, whether it was public infrastructure or a block of flats by the water, to having overtones at least of sustainability.

I did science at uni and I spent a decade covering it as a journalist. I have an understanding of its culture and of the scientific method at its heart. So when more than 98% of climate scientists say something is happening, I'm inclined to think it is happening.
The climate is changing because people are liberating more carbon into the atmosphere. If we stopped doing that tomorrow, the carbon we've already released would continue to change the climate for many decades. So we need to make progress on how we live in a new climate, one that atmospheric scientists are telling us will feature more and bigger dramatic weather events. More destructive cyclones, more prolonged droughts, wetter floods and longer heatwaves.

Of all the wealthy countries, Australia's thought to be the most at risk of being damaged by climate change. Part of me wonders if the Dutch don't have something to say about that…but there it is. So I'd like to see real progress in working out how our cities, where most of us live, can cope with different climates.

When the future is modelled on computers, the models give such a range of outcomes that they can't be relied upon. We need to make progress there.
And once we have, we need to make progress on adaptations so that Australians can continue to live and prosper. Wherever we are, we're going to need access to enough water…and on the land we have to work out how to continue to grow food and fibre.

We have to make a lot more progress in health, education and employment outcomes of indigenous Australians. These, I believe, are all achievable. But just as important, I think, is

making progress on curing what you might call ‘a malaise of the soul’: a deep unhappiness…and there’s a lot further to go on that.

You might think, as you get to the end of this, that my version of progress is all about meeting challenges, some of them very vital. But enormous progress has been made and I’m optimistic about the future.

One reason for this is the quiet revolution has happened with fatherhood over the last few decades – Dads are much more involved in their children’s lives that they ever used to be. Obviously this isn’t true for every father and it’s not true for enough… but more and more are caring for children in a way their own fathers never did…and more are making time to know their kids properly and be in their lives. This is good for the children, it will be good the adolescents and adults they become…it’s good for the Dads…and it’s good for the Mums too. It’s progress – there’s no other word for it.

I’m also optimistic because I think we’ve barely scratched the surface in terms of the difference the internet will make in our lives. We are going to need all the knowledge and ability to make connections that we can get…and the net is going to be the great enabler of that.

I also believe we’re making progress on understanding what it doesn’t do so well. Interacting with someone on the net is never going to the same as being with them. There’s something about proximity that can’t be replicated – there’s no substitute for it. I don’t know why this is exactly. I wonder if it’s because people, fundamentally, are still mammals and there’s something vitally important to us in being able to touch and smell someone else…even if we don’t take the opportunity to touch them, and aren’t aware that we can smell them.
I may be wrong about that. I’m wrong about a lot.

But I’m right about this: people, working together, harnessing technology, can do amazing things. We’ve always done it before.

*The views expressed in this opinion piece are the personal views of the individuals concerned and they do not represent the views of the ABS. The intention of this opinion piece is to generate debate and discussion about how Australians view progress. These views will assist the ABS in measuring progress in the future. The ABS continues to be independent and objective.*

Return to Home

## Comments

**#1 David May**
29/08/2011 12:30:54 PM Richard Aedy on progress

Please do not confuse development or change with progress. The basic idea of bettering ourselves does not necessarily mean that we embrace technological change, ideological change or expand our population, etc. In most situations adaptation is the most relevant requirement, where we the population of Australia respond (Jointly and Severally - legal mumbo jumbo) to the current situation. I think that a debate progress (how well we are doing and how well we are doing it.) is a great idea. I think it will help us to keep our heads on and in the right place. I look forward to more from this site.

**#2 Julie**
29/08/2011 1:54:40 PM Richard Aedy on progress

Well said Richard. You and your team really do understand what matters in life… keep up the good work :)x

**#3 William Young**
30/08/2011 8:01:22 AM Richard Aedy on progress

Lots of interesting points in Richard's article. I particularly like the mention of the 'quiet revolution' in the fatherhood. There must be other good examples of 'progress' out there too? Perhaps the fact that tobacco is now universally understood to be undesirable and damaging?

I also like Richard's comments on improving educational outcomes by increasing retention and improving teaching.

I think the research Richard mentions is from Eric Hanushek of Stanford

{ Link }

This 2 page article outlines his initial arguments:

Teacher Quality matters, but we don't measure or reward it well.

{ Link }

This article / lit review lays out some of his theories including (p18):

"The magnitude of estimated differences in teacher quality is impressive. Hanushek

(1992) shows that teachers near the top of the quality distribution can get an entire

year's worth of additional learning out of their students compared to those near the

bottom.16 That is, a good teacher will get a gain of 1.5 grade level equivalents while a

bad teacher will get 0.5 year for a single academic year."

{ Link }

**#4 Serhat (MAP team)**
30/08/2011 12:30:13 PM Richard Aedy on progress

Hi William. Thanks for your comment and the links you provided. Education, especially equity in access to quality education has been one of the aspirations we've been receiving throughout our consultation. Some important components of that aspiration could be the access to quality teaching and resources that you mention.

**#5 Maureen McKenna**
1/09/2011 3:11:13 PM Richard Aedy on progress

I'm glad you a so optimistic Richard, I wish I shared your outlook. All I am aware of is the gap between the haves and have nots. I'm very mature age now own my own home and have money in the bank but it depresses me to see the price of home ownership in this country and the total lack of social housing. I think economic rationalism is the worst policy we could have because it just ensures the survival of the fittest and dismisses a compassionate and inclusive society. But, then Margaret Thatcher told us we don't have one, we only have an economy, didn't she?

**#6 Julia Thornton**
2/09/2011 9:36:33 AM Richard Aedy on progress

Richard, you kept saying on air that "progress" and "happiness" are not the same thing. However it was precisely a definition of "happiness" that the Utilitarians were pursuing when they defined happiness / progress as "the greatest good for the greatest number". Happiness for a very long time has been associated with the direction a good providence will naturally take us. This is why the hand of the market (providence) is supposed to be invisible. You can't see the God that is supposedly steering us towards happiness via the market.

The trouble with the definition of "happiness / progress as we have inherited it from our religious and enlightenment forebears is that its all about us. Have a look at this blog and other answers to this question, and see how many people equate "progress" with their own personal happiness.

My concern is how do we change the measurements that are important to society, so that all of us, human and non human can get a look in. At the moment we are in the middle of the biggest extinction period since the dinosaurs, but this has not affected how we go about things one jot. To capture this it is not a question of expanding the current definitions to include more things about ourselves, but of completely revising and reorienting our rush to "improve" ourselves as individuals at the expense of other people and the rest of the environment. We need a new economics and we need to put economics in its place. There was a time when there was no " economics" but there has never been a time when we have had no society, and no environment. We have to stop taking things from the environment and from society as if they have no cost.

**#7 Joyce**
2/09/2011 12:50:00 PM Richard Aedy on progress

Yes, I too am in favour of progress, especially where it touches on yesterday and today.. Your comment, Richard, about. 'a deep unhappiness' in so many of us is the reason, I think, that so many of us need spectacle, rather than reflection.. Realise that: to be able to help others, you also need to look after yourself and that doesn't mean surrounding yourself with luxury food, furniture.

.

Here I need to quote Lillian Holt 'If we don't tell each other stories, we'll become impoverished.' Alongside the Environment, and the Economy, we need Story. Australians are being lavished with Spectacle, starved of. Story. Story is treated like a homeless person, it is tossed a blanket from time to time and given a bowl of soup here and there to keep going..

How would you (I) feel if you had to sleep in the open? We still have half a million homeless people in Australia. A galling statistic. A miserable life for so many in our midst. The nights are bitter for the homeless, the days relentless.. Yet there are so many of us in huge houses with huge cars, huge tv sets, huge refrigerators, and without solar energy.

Then, how would you (I) cope without enough, and/or running, water from a tap? How would you (I) cope when temperatures rise

to 50 degrees celcius and over? Is it possible to consider living with less 'goods' and more good-will? Do you know that in Thailand, for instance, a man and his child work in the field ( in 35 degree celcius temperatures measured in the shade) all day, under the sun, for $10? - Aye. Australians leave a huge foot print on this earth, yet there are some powerful people among us who are againt, for instance, a carbon tax. Sheesh.

We need solar energy, translated into installations via our scientific friends, as much as we need solar and lunar energy via our friends in the Humanities. Thanks for this program, Life Matters. Best. j

**#8 Ken Williams**
2/09/2011 2:51:27 PM  Richard Aedy on progress

Richard, when I was reading your article, I was reminded of Albert Einstein's answer to a New York reporters question, on how he would solve the the world economic malaise of that period. Simple! said Einstein, give the poorest people money! I believe this remedy is current today. If you want to measure the progress of your country look to all the needs of your poorest people and have ultimate concern for all your citizens.

**#9 Stephany Durack**
30/12/2011 5:34:02 PM  Richard Aedy on progress

Thanks for sharing your thoughts, Richard. I agree that the heart of progress in Australia rests on how we create opportunities for people - opportunities for health, creativity, learning, work and participating in communities; that people working together and harnessing technology is a critical element in a strong future for Australia.

I have lived for many years in the inner suburbs of some of Australia's great cities. Innovation and access to advances in technology can be seen and experienced daily. Recently, I had a sea change, and now live in a beautiful seaside town.... where you struggle to get a decent TV reception and you can forget about inner city telecommunication/broadband speeds.

It has been a dramatic reminder that if you are in the right spot with the right income then its easier to adopt new technologies, to adapt to new tools for working, engaging and sharing ideas.

I am learning first hand that social, geographic and/or income (or a lack thereof) can create formidable barriers to opportunities created by new technologies.

Consequently, I fall in the same camp as Joyce, Julia and Ken above in wanting to see Australia's progress not only measured in GDP but by how we adapt and innovate to address quality of life for people currently living on our social margins. People who become invisible when generic economic national statistics are used to measure progress.

For me it's not just about sharing the wealth around. It is also about changing the way we problem solve and the values and discussions individuals, Governments and businesses use to make decisions.

England - the country that taught the world how to 'do' economic rationalism - now has a school of Economist's that are talking about 'place resiliance'. This idea, put simply, looks at how well a community will survive a major economic upheaval (such as a local factory closing) and what to do when it does happen.

This approach means that the local economic, social and environmental strengths and relationships within a community are considered when Government intervention funds are allocated to local projects.

This approach to Government intervention does not rely on the trickle down effect of a major project in the region (which has peripheral tangible benefit to local people). It is not a 'cash and carry', direct exchange approach. It is a more strategic, approach that builds on local relationships, local capacity and where local people help determine where funds are spent.

It is not a new idea. Social activitists have been promoting this approach in one form or another for decades. It is, however, relatively new for economists to be thinking and Government to be investing in this way.

Australia's progress will be measured by how well we create bridges to technology, health, learning, work, creativity marginalised people. It will also be measured by how effectively we do business and the strengths of the relationships we put in place that will determine the quality of the life of our children, and our children's children.

**#10 steve jenkin**
20/01/2012 6:25:19 PM  Richard Aedy on progress

Current links for articles by Eric A. Hanushek at Stanford

[comment #3 William Young 30/08/2011 08:01:22]

Home page: { Link }

Valuing Teachers: How Much is a Good Teacher Worth?

{ Link }

and the academic article "The Economic Value of Higher Teacher Quality." Eric A. Hanushek. Economics of Education Review, 30(2), pp. 466-479. (June 2011).

{ Link }

Subject:
Richard Aedy on progress
Name:
Email:
Add Comment:

© Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 All Rights Reserved | Privacy Policy | Disclamer and Terms of Use | Contact Us